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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000397

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Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) The GOC wrapped up a three-day marathon of attacks on the dissident community and on USINT with a second press conference at the Foreign Ministry (MINREX) led by FM Perez Roque. The campaign had been launched at another MINREX conference on Monday, May 19 (REF XXX). Perez-Roque devoted most of his remarks to a recapitulation of the final edition of the full story broadcast on the nightly Mesa Redonda (Round table) television program, which focused on the activities of USINT. He then concluded his statements by demanding that the State Department conduct a full investigation of the actions of its employees in Havana and punish them accordingly.

¶2. (C) The GOC used the Mesa Redonda program over a three day period to make its case that (a) dissident leader Martha Beatriz Roque (MBR) was being funded by the "renowned terrorist" Santiago Alvarez and his Miami-based organization Fundacion Rescate Juridico (Judicial Rescue Foundation), (b) that Alvarez was a close associate of accused terrorist Luis Posada Carriles, and that (c) USINT COM Parmly served as a courier to bring money from Alvarez to MBR. The third evening's broadcast lasted two hours and was devoted to alleged activities by USINT employees, past and present, with an emphasis on COM Parmly. Using intercepted phone conversations and e-mail exchanges, videotapes of encounters between USINT personnel and Cuban dissidents, and appropriately-timed injections of innuendo, the Mesa Redonda hosts built what they called "overwhelming proof" that USINT has been supplying what it refers to as "mercenaries" with money and materiel provided by the Miami Cuban-American community for some time over the energetic protests of MINREX.

¶3. (C) Though most of the story is built on otherwise unrelated facts held together with dubious suppositions and distortions, some key "facts" are simply false. While showing a video of COM Parmly and PolCounts Benson getting into the COM's car with MBR and Vladimiro Roca, the announcers state that, during the car ride, the dissidents were supplied with money to hold a meeting of dissidents to discuss the "Agenda Minima" unity proposal organized by MBR (REF B). In fact, the two did ask for USINT support for the meeting during the ride, arguing that their Miami contacts had refused to provide them with the funding needed to hold the meeting in a hotel. At the time, however, COM had argued back that it would be a bad idea for USINT to be involved directly with the meeting, either in providing funding (which it did not have in any case) or a venue.

¶ 14. (C) In response to several questions from members of the international press, both Perez Roque and MINREX Americas Division chief Josefina Vidal steered clear of any suggestion that the GOC might attempt to break relations with the US or PNG USINT staffers. Instead, they called upon the USG to "do the right thing" and investigate the charges that USINT personnel are supporting terrorist activities and mete out appropriate punishments. Given the vehemence of the denunciations made at the two press conferences and throughout the three days of Mesa Redonda programs, the international journalists realistically assumed that, if the story were true, the only option would be to expel the offending diplomats. That Cuban officials did not seem interested in considering such an option says much about their faith in their own story.

¶ 15. (C) On the other hand, we do not believe that USINT was the main target of this exercise. It is clear that the GOC wanted to get a good number of body punches into USINT in the process, and lump as much discredit on outgoing COM Parmly as possible before he leaves, but we believe its real focus was elsewhere. One possible target was the Cuba Solidarity Day activities on May 21. A journalist at the May 19 conference asked about any connection to the May 21 activities and MINREX Americas chief Vidal reminded him somewhat harshly to stay on task and pay attention to the issue at hand. There was to be no mention of Cuba Solidarity Day. Also, GOC officials were undoubtedly aware that a Congressional Notification document had gone forward on the FY 2008 foreign assistance budget for Cuba and they may hope this incident will delay or derail that process.

¶ 16. (C) On balance, however, we believe the real target was MBR and other dissidents. Reports we have received regarding the first "Agenda Minima" meeting and its follow-up indicate

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that the participants have achieved an unusual amount of success in creating unity among the usually fractious opposition groups. The central theme of the television campaign, which was clearly directed at a domestic Cuban audience, was that MBR and other members of the opposition are dangerous mercenaries in league with the fearsome terrorist Posada Carriles through his acolyte Santiago Alvarez. Much of the material presented appears designed to discredit MBR as thoroughly as possible in the eyes of the Cuban people. Moreover, the content of the second day of Mesa Redonda repeated several critical statements MBR had made about other dissident leaders in an apparent attempt to sow discord among the opposition as well. That MBR and the other dissidents may have begun to achieve some sort of unity at the same time that the USG was approving significant amounts of money for the island may have convinced the GOC officials that it was time to act.

¶ 17. (C) Having instituted some changes which, while they are by no means radical, have served to feed a desire for further change, the Raul Castro regime has taken risks. Raul and company appear to believe they can institute changes to the Cuban economy, but to do so while maintaining the level of control they desire, they must ensure that any incipient political liberalization is stifled quickly. A hard hit at MBR and the other leading dissidents built on a campaign to discredit them in the eyes of the Cuban people and other international audiences may be part of that process. That USINT is tarred in the process is probably seen as an extra added benefit.

¶ 18. (C) We do not believe the GOC was interested in expelling any USINT staff as they feared the potential losses to their own operations conducted from CUBINT. As a result, most of their vitriol was targeted at COM Parmly, whom they know is leaving in a matter of weeks anyway. In the same way, we do not believe they intend to arrest MBR or any of the other dissidents, though many of the latter have pointed out to us that the 2003 crackdown began in a very similar fashion.

Now, however, such arrests would not play well in Europe and the Cubans are counting on a change in the EU common position in the near future. Rather, they will likely remain content in trying to ruin MBR's reputation and exacerbate splits that historically have existed among the Cuban opposition.

¶9. (C) USINT intends to continue its regular contacts with all members of the dissident community and maintain a "business as usual" attitude in our activities.

PARMLY